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## Moore Carol (21K239)

**From:** Clara Hemphill [clarahemphill@earthlink.net]  
**To:** Moore Carol (21K239)  
**Cc:**  
**Subject:** Updating NYC's Best Public Middle Schools  
**Attachments:**

**Sent:** Wed 1/16/2008 9:30 AM

To Carol Moore:

I'm updating my book, NYC's Best Public Middle Schools (published by Teachers College Press), and would like to arrange a visit to Mark Twain. You may recall my colleague Deborah Apsel last visited your school in 2004. Her profile appeared both on the Insideschools.org website and in the book.

Do you have time to show me around before the February break? Or could you assign a member of your staff to show me around? In a pinch, we could arrange a telephone interview, but it's always better to visit in person, I believe.

I'm attaching the text of the 2004 edition of the book.

Thanks very much for your attention

Clara Hemphill  
212-861-9880

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BROOKLYN OFFICE

Mark Twain Intermediate School for the Gifted and Talented, IS 239

2401 Neptune Avenue Brooklyn, NY 11224 (718) 266-0814

[www.marktwainis239.org](http://www.marktwainis239.org)

Admissions: citywide High school choices: Stuyvesant, Brooklyn Tech, Murrow

Grade levels: 6-8 Test scores: R \*\*\*\*\*, M \*\*\*\*\*

Enrollment: 1,300 Ethnicity: 53%W 13%B 9%H 24%A

Class size: 30-35 Free lunch: 32%

A beautifully equipped, first-rate school in a desolate corner of Brooklyn, Mark Twain Intermediate School for the Gifted and Talented is one of the most sought after in the city. The magnet school, created as part of a court-ordered desegregation plan in the 1970s, attracts children from all over Brooklyn and even parts of Queens—despite its grim setting amid vacant lots and dirty marshes on a nearly abandoned spit of land west of Coney Island.

Mark Twain provides a firm foundation for entrance to the city's most selective high schools. The school typically sends 15% to 20% of its graduating class to Stuyvesant, and 10% each to Brooklyn Tech, Midwood, and Murrow—all top schools.

The building is one of the oldest junior high schools in the city, built in 1936. The school is spotless and cheerful, with two giant, sunny gymnasiums and a pleasant library filled with plants, colorful murals, and papier-mâché figures made by the kids. The classrooms are big and bright, with wood floors, wood coat closets and cabinets, and large windows.

The school has a drama department that puts on plays and musicals worthy of Broadway. It has a

sports department with elaborate gymnastics equipment and tournament-level tennis competitions. It has an extensive music department with an impressive orchestra and full band, and a vocal department in which children learn both sight-reading and music theory.

Mark Twain has three math labs where kids study 3-D geometry on computers, science labs where kids may study microbiology and organic chemistry for 3 years, a television studio and darkroom equipped with free cameras for kids to study photography, a mirrored dance studio, an art studio, a woodworking lab, and a sewing room.

Children are admitted either on the basis of their overall academic achievement or on the basis of a demonstrated talent in one of ten areas: art, athletics, computer math, creative writing, dance, drama, instrumental music, photo media, science, or vocal music.

Each child takes a test or audition in two "talent" areas. Once enrolled, a child is assigned to one "talent," which becomes a sort of supermajor for his or her 3 years at Mark Twain. In addition to regular course work, children take six extra periods a week in their "talent" area. That means, for example, if your "talent" is science, you'll take five periods a week of science with your regular classmates plus six periods of science with your "talent" class.

One boy was able to complete a full high school science curriculum before he graduated from 8th grade. A girl was thrilled to study solid geometry on the computer, and to learn how to build complex geometric solids from construction paper.

In a drama "talent" class we saw on one of our visits, 8thgraders improvised a scene in front of the group; others scouted classrooms and hallways with their digital video camera in hopes of finding good footage for the video yearbook they were making.

In a 6th-grade computer-math "talent," 6th-graders were learning how to make Web pages. (One mother was disappointed by the math "talent," however, and transferred her son to another school after 6 weeks.)

The teachers are, for the most part, old-fashioned. Most are experienced, relaxed, and happy to be teaching. In the regular classes, outside the "talent" areas, we saw some teachers who invigorated class discussions with interesting questions and projects, and others who were a bit dull.

A longtime social studies teacher known as "Miss D." offered an inspiring lesson on power marriages: The 7th-grade boys wrote marriage proposals as if they were Phillip II of Spain, and the girls wrote letters of rebuff as if they were Queen Elizabeth I of England. Around the room were brightly patterned pillows students had made at home based on patterns originating from Panama Indians.

In a 7th-grade accelerated science class, kids learned about evaporation and vaporization with a great, energetic teacher. Their hands were shooting up as he asked them questions.

We also saw some drill-and-kill exercises—teachers going over practice tests ad nauseum. A few teachers lectured while sitting down at their desks, or held forth from the front of the room. Some parents complain of teachers who rely on boring textbooks rather than giving children experiments to do in science or works of literature to read in English.

Still, most teachers seem invested in the kids. All teachers give up at least one lunch period a week to provide tutoring. We saw many classrooms where kids were eating their lunch while getting extra help.

The school is safe, orderly, and disciplined. Members of the staff wait outside in the morning and afternoon to make sure kids come and go without incident. Because the school is far from the nearest subway stop and few children live within walking distance, nearly everyone comes by bus—free yellow buses for kids within district, private buses paid for individually by parents for others. The fact that children are bussed means there is little after-school life. Most children leave the school promptly and have little time for informal socializing or after-school programs. (There is, however, after-school tennis and bowling as part of the athletics "talent." The parent coordinator

and an active PTA member were starting up an early morning basketball league.) There are two special education classes for children classified as MIS II (with emotional problems). Children are assigned by the district. These students join the general education kids for certain classes and take advantage of some of the school's facilities. One special education class baked cookies in the school kitchen. Another child in special education joined the sports "talent" class because he was a talented athlete. The school seems good at adapting the work to each child's needs. In one special education class, a group of struggling students learned about plotting coordinates; and each had a different assignment according to his or her skill level. The school has no bells. Class changes are boisterous but not unpleasant. There is no tracking in 6th grade. In 7th and 8th grades, the best students are assigned to "honors" classes in math, science, and English. More than half the students take Regents science and Math A, courses commonly offered in high school. Children are assigned to a "cluster" of 150 children and five teachers, who have a common preparation period and who are supposed to coordinate their lessons. (Some parents say the coordination is imperfect and that, for example, several teachers might give an exam on the same day.)

There are about 450 children in each grade, and an assistant principal is assigned to stay with them through their 3 years at the school. That means the assistant principal has a chance to get to know the children well—and in doing so breaks down the anonymity of a large middle school. Class size ranges from 15 for some minor subjects, such as photography, to 37 for some general academic classes.

Some parents complain that certain activities are limited to children with a particular talent. If you're in the science "talent," for example, you can't work on the student newspaper; if you're in the creative writing "talent," you can't take tennis. But others said it's impossible for children to study everything. "Where in the course of the day can you possibly fit it in?" said one mother. The workload is heavy. "My daughter was happy, but she did complain about not having a social life," one mother said. "She would be up to 10, 11 o'clock at night studying. Sometimes, it would go over to the weekend and you'd have to cancel plans so she could work."

Mark Twain became a magnet school for the gifted and talented in 1975 as part of a court-ordered desegregation plan. The NAACP had sued the Board of Education in 1971, arguing that a rezoning plan had illegally transformed Mark Twain from a racially integrated school into one that was nearly all black.

The federal court agreed that the gerrymandering amounted to illegal segregation, and a plan was drawn up for a racially integrated school that would draw children from the entire district.

The legacy of the court decision is an extremely complex admissions formula. Children are admitted on the basis of a combination of factors including their race, their test scores, and the results of their "talent" test.

Under the terms of the court order, the racial balance must be within 5 percentage points of the racial makeup of the district, which is roughly half white and half nonwhite. Blacks, Hispanics, and Asians are grouped together and compete against one another for spots; whites compete against other whites for spots.

Out-of-district children should call the school in the fall to request an application, or check out the school's Website. An open house is held in November, which parents describe as a mob scene of more than 800 parents. Auditions are in January.